

A little over 50 years ago, Don Weeks, then-Michigan Economic Development director, told his son, a young journalism student at Michigan State University, about a concept he had been thinking about for months.

Working with many others, he had formed a vision for a way to unite business, labor, government and folks from communities across the state under one banner to promote Michigan. The idea: an annual "Michigan Week" for residents to beat the drums for their state.

Son George's reaction: "It sounds a little corny."

True to his character, Don Weeks did not let negative comments deter him. In typical fashion, he soon won support for the Michigan Week concept from not only his son, but from the governor, lawmakers and residents in both peninsulas. With the groundwork laid, Michigan Week was launched on May 2, 1954, with Governor G. Mennen Williams declaring: "We have much to be proud of in our state, and I am more than glad to be part of an observance which emphasizes the blessings our Creator has bestowed upon Michigan and its citizens. Michigan is a great state, but let's not keep that fact a secret."

Fifty years later, Michigan's assets are still proudly trumpeted through Michigan Week.

The good fortune that Mother Nature saw fit to bestow upon the mitten state is no longer a secret, thanks in large part to the 50 consecutive Michigan Weeks since 1954. But to most people, the driving force behind Michigan Week—Don Weeks—still is unknown.

Weeks had a genius for partnering with decision-makers and lobbying them relentlessly behind the scenes to make things happen. It's no accident that Michigan is the only state in the union that enjoys this type of weeklong celebration.

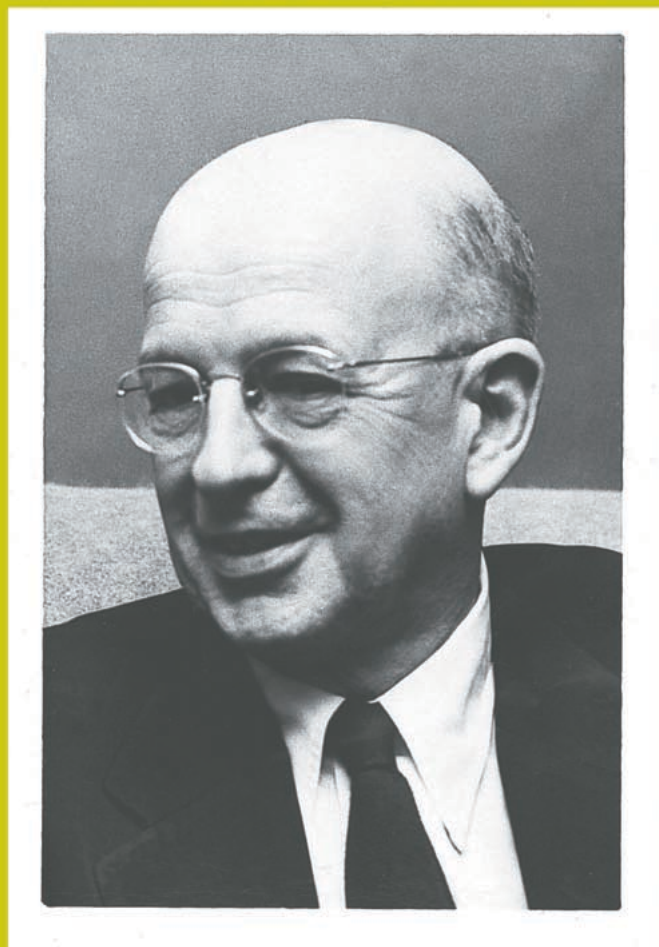
Weeks was city editor of the *Traverse City Record Eagle* and early sparkplug of that town's National Cherry Festival. In 1931 he became the festival's first manager, as well as secretary of the Traverse City Chamber of Commerce.

His outlook was broad, and in 1942 he was appointed by Gov. Murray D. Van Wagoner to stimulate greater civilian participation in Michigan's civil defense. In 1944 Gov. Harry Kelly appointed Weeks as director of the Michigan Planning Commission. Later that decade Weeks wrote the bill that Gov. Kim Sigler submitted and the legislature adopted setting up the Michigan Economic Development Department. Weeks was named acting director and, in 1950, the commission that oversaw the agency gave Weeks the nod as official director.



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MICHIGAN Weeks

by Jim Schultz



Michigan Week Coordinator Jim Schultz. (Photo by David Trumpie.)

That marked the beginning of a partnership between Weeks and commission Chairman Dan Gerber, president of Gerber Baby Foods in Fremont and a fellow Michigan booster. Weeks also formed bonds with commission members Walker Cisler, president of the Detroit Edison Company, and Leonard Woodcock, leader of the United Auto Workers. Through them and others, Weeks was able to move Michigan's establishment steadily along the path of bringing to life the vision for a statewide celebration of Michigan.

One of his first moves was to have the Economic Development Commission establish an advisory committee, named the Promote Michigan Task Force composed of 50 business leaders. Cisler led the task force. In 1953 the group formed the non-profit association Greater Michigan Inc, as an advisory committee to the commission. Cisler was elected president of Greater Michigan Inc. Among its recommendations to the Economic Development

Commission: hold an annual event geared toward building pride in Michigan and publicizing the state.

The commission accepted the recommendation and invited Greater Michigan Inc. to join in sponsorship. Like a magician with an endless bag of tricks, Weeks had worked his organizational magic.

A 1962 column by Jay Smith, editor of the *Record Eagle*, provided this insight on the role Weeks played: "Weeks had a way of working behind the scenes, while bugging top fellows to work their head off for assorted goals—and giving them full credit." Smith also shed light on how the department that gave birth to Michigan Week came about: "Don and the late Senator Jim Milliken [father of Gov. William Milliken and son of the department store founder and state senator] quarreled continually because Don wanted Jim to do something that Jim didn't think was important enough to do, but ended up doing it. It was during one of these arguments that the Michigan Economic

Development Department was launched. Don had the idea and Jim did the spade work."

It was the intent of the committee that Michigan Week would begin within state government. The first Michigan Week in 1954 used the tag line "This is YOUR Michigan!" and prided itself as "a seven-day celebration for 7 million citizens."

The committee made many decisions and fine-tunings that have stood a half-century test of time. Spring was chosen over fall as the right time of year for Michigan Week so that summer tourism could be promoted. The inaugural Michigan Week began with the first week of May, gradually giving way to mid-May as northern communities complained that snow curtailed a number of outdoor Michigan Week activities.

Each day of Michigan Week was given a name that celebrated a particular reason or resource that made Michigan a special place to live, work or raise a family.

Weeks launched the first Michigan Week with a healthy balance of vision and pragmatism. On the practical side, promotional materials were distributed throughout the state at almost no cost to the department. Weeks accomplished this through the sale of the following materials: a colorful brochure @ \$2.40 per 100; a decal that would stick to almost any surface @ 12 cents each; a glow-in-the-dark bumper sticker guaranteed to glow for three months @ 15 cents each; an 11" x 34" streamer @ 15 cents apiece; and a freestanding counter card for a mere 15 cents. Guarding his vision of what Michigan Week should be, Weeks and the committee initiated the following "theme" days: Spiritual Foundations Day, Mayors Exchange Day, Hospitality Day, Our Livelihood Day, Education Day, Our Heritage Day and New Frontiers Day.

Two of Weeks' favorite Michigan Week promotions related to American traditions. One was based on the Michigan flag, which was flown at every occasion during the week and used as a prize for many contests. The other was a unique program called the Michigan Week Minuteman. The heart of the program was a wallet-size card, filled to the edges with wonderful state facts that could turn

an ordinary citizen into, well, a “Michigan Week Minuteman.”

Weeks reasoned that, just as Revolutionary War Minutemen became famous for dropping their plows and turning into soldiers at a moment’s notice, so, too, could our good citizens become Michigan Week Minutemen. They could refer to their wallet cards for a simple minute—enough time to chat about a Michigan highlight and still respect a person’s schedule.

In terms of historic moments, Michigan Week was certainly in good company that first year. It climaxed at a groundbreaking ceremony for the Mackinac Bridge.

Throughout the 1950s, Michigan Week continued to grow within the Michigan Economic Development Commission. By 1961 Gerber was chairman of the newly named Greater Michigan Foundation. He announced that the foundation would operate Michigan Week separately from the Economic Development Department. Upon Weeks’ resignation from state government to become director of the foundation, Gerber said: “In Don Weeks I feel we have hired one of the ablest organizational executives in the country. I don’t know anyone who’s more effective at getting people to work together or knows more about promotion than Don Weeks.”

Weeks directed the foundation from 1961 until his death in 1968. The Weeks connection with Michigan Week continued as his widow, Leona Weeks, the first woman president of the Public Relations Association of Michigan, was appointed executive director of the foundation.

In a 1971 interview, she reiterated one of her husband’s core Michigan

Week values, stating, “...We’re not promoting Michigan as such. We are promoting the *promotion* of Michigan. We want to make every citizen a salesman, a knowledgeable salesman of our state.”

In 1993 the Greater Michigan Foundation ceased operation and the Historical Society of Michigan took control of Michigan Week. Two years later, the observance moved back into state government as a project of the Department of State. It moved to its current home in the Department of History, Arts and Libraries in 2001.

Over the past 50 years, Michigan Week has been the fortunate benefactor of many individual efforts. All of them can be traced to Don Weeks, who was not the stereotypical glad-hand promoter, but a quiet, persistent man whose main tool was the phone—including numerous phone booths along the road. In his 1999 Michigan Week proclamation, Gov. John Engler gave credit where credit was due by stating: “Michigan Week was created in 1954 by the late Don C. Weeks.”

While he floated the idea, was instrumental in implementing it, ran it during its early days and was widely credited with founding it, Weeks preferred to work in the background as an organizer and would be the first to stress that creation of this annual celebration was a collective effort by many from business, labor, education and communities across the state.

This way of operating also is why Weeks is listed as a founder of the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame. *The Detroit News* sports columnist Joe Falls wrote on March 31, 1993, that the idea for the hall stemmed from a conversation between Weeks and George

Alderton, legendary 1923–62 sports editor of the *Lansing State Journal*. Falls said: “They hatched it one morning in a barbershop in Traverse City. Not knowing what to do with it, they turned the idea over to Biggie Munn, the MSU football coach and athletic director, who in turn gave it to Nick Kerbaway, who had been a publicity man at MSU,” and built it into “something special.”

When Weeks died in 1968, the *Detroit Free Press*, in its lead editorial headlined “A Man for Michigan,” said:

“From the Rocky Coast of the Keweenaw Peninsula to the black dirt of Lenawee County there are those who regret the loss of a friend who not only loved Michigan but also did something about it. Don Weeks, the tireless promoter of Michigan Week, is dead in Lansing.

“As executive director of the Greater Michigan Foundation, Weeks did more than function as a once-a-year drumbeater. He learned Michigan, as few men know her, and it developed into a wonderful love affair.

“At the drop of a question he could tell you about Rogers City limestone quarries, the rosewood furniture at the Herman Miller factory, the production of Lincoln Continentals, how the skiing was at Boyne Mountain, the quaint scenery at Grindstone City and the annual production of sugar beets and wheat in the Thumb.

“Man is fragile and his years are numbered, but Don Weeks has left his mark.”

Jim Schultz is Michigan Week coordinator and member of the communications office for the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries.

Michigan Week Goes Retro for 50th

Michigan Week is reaching back as it marches forward.

For this year’s 50th anniversary celebration, planners are embracing the original theme: “This is YOUR Michigan.” The official flyer distributed to groups and communities around the state sports that theme along with a very 1954-looking mother and daughter heading out for what might be a day at the beach.

To coin another phrase from 1954, Michigan Week is a “seven-day celebration”—only this time for 10-million-plus residents, up three-plus million from 50 years ago. Coordinated by the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL), this year’s statewide festival runs May 15–21.

HAL is reminding communities that even in challenging economic times, there are great opportunities to mark old and new ways of “celebrating all that’s truly great about Michigan’s history, resources and potential for the future.” Long-continuing and more-recent traditions include parades, community volunteer and leadership awards, mayors exchange day, a youth photo contest and a celebration of notable Michigan books.

For “tools you can use,” downloadable logos, nomination forms, contest details and suggestions on ways to make Michigan Week a memorable time for your community, visit HAL’s website at www.michigan.gov/michiganweek.

